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The pursuit of lifelong participation: the role of professional football clubs in the delivery of physical education and school sport in England

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Abstract

Physical Education and School Sport (PESS) offers a key vehicle to support the development of lifelong participation in children and young people. At a time of government cuts and the emergence of external providers, including professional football clubs, it is pertinent to explore current practice. This research set out to explore the delivery, and partnerships involved within the School Sports Premium, particularly the relationship between the community arms and registered charities of professional football clubs and schools to deliver PESS. Semi-structured interviews with community managers from football community programmes and head teachers revealed two key themes; partnership working and the role of the community coach. Findings suggest the need to develop the scope of the partnership and to build methods of evaluation to understand the impact of the coaches' practice in schools. Further evaluation of the partnerships between professional football clubs and schools would bring an increased understanding of the effectiveness and impact of the partnerships, in order to improve practice and the subsequent effectiveness of PESS, in terms of its contribution towards lifelong participation for children and young people.

Introduction

Physical Education and School Sport (PESS) has been documented as a complex and politicized context.¹ It is fair to summarize PESS England, in terms of subject marginalization, resource deficit and policy indifference. PESS, in particular, has been expected to achieve multiple outcomes by a range of stakeholders,² including the promotion of physical activity (PA), which is a major consideration for the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)³ in order to support lifelong participation. In the post Olympic era, and the funding cuts and subsequent dismantling of School Sports Partnership Programme, which was previously spearheaded by the Youth Sport Trust (YST).

The new coalition government announced a new investment in PESS through the PE and Sport Premium for primary schools. This involved the distribution of over £450 million directly to primary school head teachers to improve PESS between 2013 and 2016. This investment has resulted in the re-emergence and upsurge of a new type of external provider after a short, but difficult year before the announcement of the PE and Sport premium. The decentralization of decision making on this investment to head teachers has seen a range of willing external providers that include small businesses, charities, social entrepreneurs and professional football clubs. These organizations compete for this PESS funding. To our knowledge there is very little known and even less research as to the role of external providers working in PESS, especially professional football clubs. This research set out to explore the delivery and partnerships involved within the current PESS landscape.

Background

The promotion of PA is a major Public Health concern given the mounting evidence of its importance in increasing longevity and quality of life.⁴ Many non-communicable diseases, including cardiovascular disease, obesity and high blood pressure, track from childhood through to adulthood.⁵ Taking into account that one in three to five children in the Western world is overweight or obese,⁶ promoting PA during childhood is firmly on the Public Health agenda. The case for the promotion of PA has been further enhanced by the developing empirical base relating it to a host of positive non-physical-health outcomes, including improved cognitive functioning, strengthened self-esteem and increased employability.⁷ PESS has been seen as a means to facilitate PA opportunities for children to develop lifelong participation.

Within England, the NICE offers guidance for promoting PA for children and young people.⁸ This includes 15 recommendations, all of which offer resonance for schools. Through PESS and a variety of incidental opportunities during the school period, the school setting can play a major contributing role in children and young people's PA.⁹ PE, in particular, has long been expected to realize multiple aims. In addition to its role as a key societal vehicle for the promotion of health-enhancing PA, it is also expected to be the platform for the teaching of fundamental movement skills, encourage voluntary sports engagement and contribute to talent development.¹⁰ The challenges faced by those leading and delivering PE during the latter decades of the twentieth century have been well documented, and it is fair to summarize the results in England in terms of subject marginalization, resource deficit and policy indifference.¹¹ However, the growing political interest in sport, echoed in education, notably around the potential of PESS to contribute to broader political policy objectives has been substantial. Consequently, by 2002, the New Labour government decided to make PESS one of its policy priorities. The launch of the national PESS and Club Links (PESSCL) strategy in 2002 represented a major political and financial commitment by the Labour government to the creation of a ground-breaking infrastructure for PESS. Its rationale was that all children, whatever their circumstances or abilities, should be able to participate in and enjoy PESS.¹²

A major development and investment in PESS was through the national/local strategic pooling of resources, through Specialist Sports Colleges and School Sports Coordinators with School Sport Partnerships (SSPs), under the banner of PESSCL (later rebranded as PESS for Young People – PESSYP). It is worth offering some contextualization to the importance of specialist colleges. Nationally there are specialist colleges for technology, languages, etc., therefore for sport to be recognized as an important curriculum subject it also became an option for specialist school status. The position of the YST within the development of PESS in England is highly significant, and worth noting. Whilst it was formally a charity, under the New Labour government it acquired a status more akin to a government department, as can be seen by its inclusion alongside actual departments in documents like the DCMS' Playing to Win.¹³ A key target of the PESSCL was to enhance the sporting opportunities for young people.¹⁴

These key movements, helped along by the growing political and popular interest in sport, helped inform the bid for London 2012, an Olympic Games that would – it was claimed – act as a vehicle to endorse and promote sports participation for all social groups, particularly children and young people.¹⁵ On securing the bid for the Olympic Games, PSA Target 22 aimed to deliver a successful Olympic and Paralympic Games with a sustainable 'legacy' and to get more young people taking part in PE and sport.¹⁶ The candidate file asserted a commitment to a legacy for the Games to capture the long-term benefits of the Games including its promise to inspire a generation of young people in participation and sport, and to get more children and young people taking part in high quality PESS.¹⁷

The election of a new Coalition Government in 2010, made up of right-leaning Conservatives and left-leaning Liberal Democrats saw an abrupt end to many of these developments for PESS. This was part of the government's Comprehensive Spending Review enacted in 2010 to be achieved by 2014. The combination of a global economic downturn and English Treasury and Education departments adhering to broadly neo-liberal economics meant that the extravagantly funded PESSCL and PESSYP suite of programmes were judged as no longer tenable.¹⁸ In October 2010, the new Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove wrote an open letter to Sue Campbell, the Chair of the YST, informing her that his department would no longer be providing ring-fenced funding for SSPs, and would end the £162 million PESSYP funding in order to give schools the time and freedom to focus on providing competitive sport.¹⁹

In many ways, the new schools competition framework was really a repackaging of elements of school games events that were part of PESSCL and PESSYP. However, the explicit focus on competitive events, which can only have a sustained impact on a minority of the school population, led some to question their long-term benefit.²⁰ A new youth sport policy document, *Creating a sporting habit for life: a new youth sport strategy*, suggested that a new approach for Britain is needed, which would be a more rigorous and targeted way of thinking that focuses on results within grassroots sport and school-club links.²¹

Improving links between schools and community sports clubs – we will work with sports such as Football, Cricket, Rugby Union, Rugby League and Tennis to establish at least 6000 partnerships between schools and local sports clubs by 2017 – making it easier for young people to continue playing sport once they leave education. (4)²²

Around this time, the Government announced the PE and Sport Premium for primary schools, and its intention to distribute over £450 million directly allocated to primary school head-teachers to improve PESS in primary schools between 2013 and 2016. This was a shift in focus from central management, to a competitive environment of less legislation and decentralized, local decision-making. The change in the funding landscape was by accompanying changes in delivery and curriculum. The generous investment that accompanied PESSCL/PESSYP fostered the emergence of a new type of external provider. The decentralized funding pattern that replaced these schemes, along with the availability of the PE and Sport Premium for primary schools, supported this development further. The result was that primary school PESS in England became taught by an unprecedented range of deliverers, including small businesses, charities, social entrepreneurs and professional sports clubs. Within this context, football emerged as a key agent within schools. This was magnified further when, in 2014, the English Premier League announced the launch of substantial investment in a 3-year programme of support and delivery of PESS in Primary School.²³

Given the public interest and mass youth appeal of football, it is hardly surprising that it has been seen as a key vehicle to deliver on social agendas.²⁴ Indeed, football has a long history of involvement in government-supported community programmes. ²⁵ Clubs played key roles in their local areas, helping to reinforce a sense of place and local identity. In this regard, football and community have become closely linked. The development of the notion of 'community institutions' took shape in the form of the national Football in the Community (FitC) programme in the 1970s.²⁶ Professional football clubs have developed a range of community-based, social partnerships, including those with local authorities and schools.²⁷ Community programmes covered a range of issues and agendas, from health improvement for men,²⁸ women,²⁹ families,³⁰ older adults,³¹ social engagement, inclusion and disability, ³² anti-social behaviour,³³ education and literacy. The recent Premier League School Sport Programme has extended to engagement directly into lessons and to the support of teacher professional development.³⁴ Such community-oriented work (or

corporate social responsibility) has seen a shift from being a perceived philanthropic pursuit to a strategic management tool, which is seen as essential to engaging and maintaining supporters and sponsors, and to ensure more effective relations with local authorities.³⁵ Research and evaluation is fundamental for gauging effectiveness, ³⁶ yet there remains very little research of the role of professional football clubs community programmes delivering PESS.³⁷ Conducting research and evaluation can contribute to the development of effective partnership working.³⁸

Given the lack of understanding on the implementation of PESS for young people and its potential for the development of lifelong participation, this research set out to explore the delivery and partnerships involved within PESS between schools and professional football clubs, specifically delivering on the School Sports Premium. Offering considerations to inform policy development and future practice across education, school sport, PE and professional football clubs at a local and national level. To our knowledge there is very little is known and even less research the role of external providers working in PESS, especially professional football clubs. This research set out to explore the delivery and partnerships involved within the current PESS landscape between professional football clubs and schools.

Methods

Research context

This study was undertaken in schools and professional football clubs in the East and West Midlands of England. Specifically, the participants involved representatives from the counties of Derbyshire, Leicestershire and Staffordshire. Derbyshire, at the time of writing, had 303 primary schools delivering education for children up to the age of 11 years. Leicestershire had 201 primary schools and Staffordshire had 274 primary schools.

The primary head teachers (n = 7) involved in the research were recruited via established contacts. An additional interview was undertaken with a Consortium Operation Manager from a Co-operative Learning Trust (CLT). The CLT is a group of schools that work in collaboration from sharing practice to resources to maximize the potential opportunity for each respective school. CLTs are usually formed due to shared geographical proximity and philosophical approach. These participants were grouped together as head teachers (n = 8), who engaged in a semi-structured interview (see Table 1). This sample was chosen as it included schools that worked with a range of external PESS-based providers, including professional football clubs. These are collectively referred to as head teachers.

The professional football clubs FitC programmes involved in the research (n = 4) were part of the Football League competition and all participants were Heads of Community (referred to as community managers here on in). The community managers (n = 4) from the football clubs engaged in a semi-structured interview (see Table 2). Participating FitC programmes were established as registered charities and had an average turnover between £300,000 and £800,000. The community programmes had a range of provision in place covering a range of areas aligned with the key pillars of the Football League Trust.³⁹ Importantly, the community programmes were involved in the provision of curriculum-based PESS provision. Participants were recruited through the support of the Football League Trust via an introductory email inviting participation in the research. All data collection took place between April and June 2013. Ethical approval was granted via University of Derby University Ethics Committee, and all participants provided informed consent.

A semi-structured interview schedule (see Tables 1 and 2) was deductively developed using previous research on the PESS and related to PA as a guide.⁴⁰ This was supplemented to consider both previous partnership research⁴¹ and with consideration to NICE guidance for promoting PA for children and young people.⁴² The researchers had previous experience of research, management and deliver of PESS including within school managed curriculum delivery, external PESS delivery organizations and partnerships between schools and professional football clubs.

Table 1. Semi-structured interview themes for head teachers.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional background • Learning philosophies and strategies • Views of effective teaching • Views and experiences of PESS • Views and experiences of partnerships
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Table 2. Semi-structured interview for community managers.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional background • Personal and organizational coaching philosophy • Views and experiences of PESS • Perceptions of key stakeholders in PESS • Views and experiences of schools and community football/sport partnerships
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Data analysis and representation

Semi-structured interviews were recorded, each lasting approximately 45 min and were transcribed verbatim. Within the analysis, the participant's names were replaced with pseudonyms so that verbatim quotes could be assigned to respective participants. A thematic analysis approach was undertaken,⁴³ which included finding and extracting common themes. Authors (DP, DH, SB) each independently read through the transcripts several times and began identifying common terms and terminology across the discourses. Firstly, themes were extracted amongst all community managers, then amongst head teachers interviews. The authors then collaborated common themes between both interview sets to help locate key themes. The themes are supplemented by verbatim citations (i.e. direct quotes) to demonstrate the contextual meaning.⁴⁴ These are identified in italics and indentations within the text.

Results

The results offer an insight into the delivery and partnership contexts between professional football clubs and schools in the era of the new PE and Sport Premium for primary schools. The two key themes that were identified are partnership working and the role of the community coach.

Partnership working

The nature of this work emphasizes the importance of partnerships and working in collaboration. So, not surprisingly participants reported that the partnership was a key feature and important consideration for both the head teachers and community managers for PESS. The legacy of the SSPs was evident within the discussions, as indicated by these participant accounts:

We have plenty of partnerships in place, many existing within schools from the schools partnership programme [SSP]. I'm not from an educational background, but we see that we bring a major value to schools. (Mrs Coalter – Head of Moreton Primary School)

We used to have a school sports partnership and they were quite effective vehicle to get external bodies involved. We are in the process of trying to re-build partnerships developed during the school sports partnership times that have been lost more recently. (Mrs Brennan – Head of Wildcoates Primary School)

There was a structure in place for the school-sport partnership, which now lost, takes away the natural progression and exit routes. (Dave – Head of Abbey Football in the Community)

It was evident that the previous structures of the SSP reached and engaged both schools and footballs clubs and other local community organizations. In its absence schools appear to have highlighted that they have shouldered some of the responsibility for developing external partnerships.

The development of these partnerships appears to have been positively influenced by the work of the SSPs. However, the community managers offered a more pragmatic understanding of partnership operations:

If you cannot provide something yourself, then you work with a partner. It's straightforward really. Schools need sport coaches, which we provide. But for specialist sports like gymnastics and swimming we partner with people to deliver too. It just makes sense. (Paul – Head of Parkview Football in the Community)

Evidently, some head teachers did not just frame the clubs' role in terms of filling a gap in provision, but also in terms of drawing in sport-specific expertise. Interestingly, some participants identified a void in the post-SSP era. These participants believed that the current partnerships required development with regard to the need to make more efficient changes to structures and resources supporting PESS within the SSP structure:

I think firstly, there's a gap on who is going to be that congruent in place of the school sport partnerships, obviously they have now disbanded. I was of the opinion that there was too many of them and it wasn't a great investment, but I am not convinced cutting away the entire structure is the best way. We need something or someone in that place, which has been left behind them. (Gary – Head of United Football in the Community)

Lumping resources into the responsibility of the head teacher of a school can be either a blessing or a nightmare. Head teachers can be a huge supporter of PE and sport, whilst others can be less so, which makes it difficult to develop partnerships at times. I know we would benefit from a specialist who can coordinate this new funding. (Mike – Head of Glenavon Football in the Community)

Whilst community managers identified a gap left in the absence of the SSP, there was a hope that the vast resources associated with the previous system would allow further opportunities at the discretion of the head teachers. However, the community managers, who many may assume would adopt commercial philosophies associated with professional football clubs, exhibited a more philanthropic approach to dealing with the concerns associated with the absence of the SSPs, and in turn partnership working:

There was a structure in place for the school-sports-partnerships, which now gone, has taken a natural progression and exit routes away. Which then puts more focus on us as an organisation and the past we would have probably just gone in, coached and stepped away. But ethically we now need to working with those local clubs and finding exit routes. Yes it is probably not seen as our role we are not funded to do that, but we need to look at the bigger picture and I think that we all need to do this for the good of sport across the board. (Paul – Head of Parkview Football in the Community)

This highlights the apparent removal of progression pathways and exit routes for children and young people, which created a gap in provision. In this instance, it was apparent that the football club was picking responsibility for this identified shortfall. Despite this evidence of commitment from the football clubs, the sustainability of the PE and Sport Premium for primary schools funding was a continued concern shared by all participants. Whilst concerns alluded to the potential influence of head teachers' philosophies, head teachers held their own suspicions:

You might get people trying to work in schools, to build a partnership, and they are willing to come in at a discounted rate, pay for a facility, and throw more into a deal. But you have to question, Who these guys are? Are they any good? Is this a sustainable approach? My guess is that most of the deals are too good to be true. (Mrs Brennan – Head of Wildcoates Primary School)

Such comments suggest that there is little quality marks available to differentiate between external providers including professional football clubs. Moreover, many participants highlighted that the new partnerships had become reliant on (and in some cases focused on) funding:

Funding is a major one, I mean you know the government has given us this amount of money now for schools, to bring in the coaches and have these new school partnerships with whoever we choose. But when that goes we are going to be able to sustain any of this? Its unlikely we will be able to sustain those kind of partnerships without the funding. (Mrs Coalter – Head of Moreton Primary School)

These are major concerns for any new or developing partnerships. The absence of clarity on the motivations for and philosophies within the partnership may be a result of a focus on the more tangible deliverables. Indeed, a major topic of conversations and a reoccurring key element related

to partnerships was the importance of ensuring quality coaching. Moreover, participants made suggestions that quality coaching contributed to the development of strong partnerships:

There is some real benefits for working in partnership, especially good quality coaching. (Mr Smith – Head of Townfield Primary School)

Umm, I suppose if these partnerships are based on coaches that are really good quality coaches then its having that, then bringing that into school, because teachers see that as well. (Mrs Coalter – Head of Moreton Primary School)

You need to make sure that whatever is happening, there is some quality assurance in place for the partnership. I think this is the big issue at the moment, which is going to be a big mine-field if you don't get it right, is the assurance that you are getting quality coaching and the partnership is going to work well. (Mike – Head of Glenavon Football in the Community)

Partnerships formed a central element in these conversations. According to some, the quality and sustainability of the partnership was the most important factor in the success of the relationship between schools and professional football clubs.

The role of the coach

Partnerships could be said to comprise an interaction of a wide range of variables, including funding, administration, leadership, values and human resources. Within the context of the partnerships being examined here, there seems little doubt that representatives of both schools and professional football clubs placed a considerable importance on the role of the coach. Perhaps this is not surprising, as the coach could be said to be the external face of the club. However, the coach also led the actual delivery of the programme in the schools. So, the partnership can be framed in terms of an exchange of human capital through the provision of sports coaching. In the light of this, it is not surprising that participants focused attention on this topic:

I've seen some really good planning and preparation from the sports coaches. (Mrs McDermott – Consortium Manager of Hale Co-operative Trust)

Qualified coaches who've been through a proper programme in order to teach sport, better able to teach that sport than teachers. (Mr Smith – Head of Townfield Primary School)

Moreover, participants from schools identified that primary teachers may exhibit limits in their practical ability in and experience of PESS. This deficiency appears to drive the perceived need for and subsequent benefits of specialist support:

It's good to get coaches into school to teach specifics...it is quite hard for teachers unless they've done the training and have got a love for that kind of sport it's difficult for them to coach it if you like. (Mrs Coalter – Head of Moreton Primary School)

If you've got skilled coaches who have got that set and expertise they are better in my experience teaching PE to the children than most teachers. Most teachers don't have the

level of coaching expertise for them to coach sports well. (Mrs Brennan – Head of Wildcoates Primary School)

I'm also conscious a lot of teachers aren't necessarily getting to it [to deliver PESS] either. They do what they have to do, but I think whilst we would prefer coaches to come in, I would like teachers to deliver some PESS. So I think it's a balancing act. (Ms Edwards – Head of Xavier Primary School)

Experience, skills, willingness and motivation appeared to contribute to the teachers' engagement in PESS. Indeed, the value of the partnership may extend beyond a simple direct transfer of funding for coaches. There was a bigger picture and added value from the partnerships they had created. Notably, head teachers highlighted that teachers used external coaches as an opportunity to develop professionally:

I think its almost continuing professional development for teachers to see the coaches working and to get the opportunity to have a look at that. (Ms Edwards – Head of Xavier Primary School)

It's the idea we have coaches working alongside teachers and developing their [the teachers] coaching skills. (Mr Smith – Head of Townfield Primary School)

This continued professional development opportunity was something shared by the community managers, who alluded to a similar reciprocal learning from the coach– teacher exchanges:

Our coaches pick-up some new ideas for good classroom behaviour management. They [coaches and teachers] give each other them ideas for curriculum and that sort of thing, but this is not a formal part of what we do, it just kind of happens. (Mike – Head of Glenavon Football in the Community)

This potential knowledge exchange did not appear to follow a coherent programme or align with any strategic or formalized intent. Participants highlighted a number of other unintended outcomes. The head teachers were keen to highlight and welcome a 'male' role model, it is clear that they also felt there is scope to broaden the role of the coach:

We work with our local football coaches. A really important thing for us is the presence and impact of male role models coming to the school. We have very few males in the teaching staff. (Mrs Murphy – St Francis Primary School)

So what I would always say is those coaches who will bring a lot to it need to be a lot more, they need to enter the world of the teacher and bring some of our approaches in the classroom to the gym. (Mrs Coalter – Head of Moreton Primary School)

So to have some kind of understanding of how to teach without make it obvious you're teaching. We teachers have a lot of the time to do this, but the coaches coming in do not necessarily have this. It depends where the coaches come from that is important to say and some coaches come in and they have an awareness of the education agenda to liaise with the school to find out what they want them to do, they don't just turn up with a bag of kit and say well we are doing this today. However, some coaches lack this awareness. (Mrs Brennan – Head of Wildcoates Primary School)

These quotations suggest and reflect the schools need for male role models [not assuming all community coaches are male] and that the scope of the role of the community coach could broaden to reflect common teaching practices within a specific school context. The community managers

shared some of this feeling. Moreover, they highlighted further challenges in recruiting the right kind of community coaches that could deliver a quality coaching session and also in being able to evaluate the success of their sessions:

An important development would be for teachers to share new ideas for good classroom management behaviour with coaches, giving them ideas for curriculum and that sort of thing. (Gary – Head of United Football in the Community)

If we put a job advert out there for a coach, people think automatically yeah it is coaching people to be better footballers, for people to be progressing into elites from grassroots into elites, but community coaches will be going into schools. In fact, our community coaches will work with one year olds to 60 years olds. (Paul – Head of Parkview Football in the Community)

Every coach comes away from a session and they know if it's gone well. But aside from that, we haven't really got any evaluation. Although we do complete quality assurance and develop for coaches. (Jason – Head of Rovers Football in the Community)

It is clear that the partnership between the school and football club could be strengthened for more effective delivery. The role of professional development as part of capacity building within football clubs, the school and the partnership contexts appeared as an important factor that emerged. One participant highlighted the success of including professional development and capacity building within the partnership:

Professional development is a key part of the partnership. It creates new provision and builds capacity, which for me, is the more important aspect in terms of your partnership. If you don't have that right moving forward then you are in trouble. All the schools we worked with last year have continued with us this year, because we embed capacity building into our work. (Dave – Head of Abbey Football in the Community)

Partnerships are based on the exchange of human capital by way of the provision of coaches and coaching to schools. Both head teachers and community managers highlighted the importance of high quality coaching and the unintended mutually beneficial continuing professional development opportunities.

Discussion

Two themes were identified through the data gathering and analysis. The first was the importance of partnership working, and its direct and indirect benefits for schools and clubs. Despite the fact that, on the whole, reports of partnership working from both head teachers and community managers were positive, there did appear to be scope for more formalization within the partnerships to help better realize their potential.

The second theme was the pivotal role of the community coaches, who acted as mediators and brokers for the partnership, as well as being the most obvious embodiment of the partnership in action. Judgements about the quality and success of the delivery of the programmes relied significantly on the perceived quality of the coaches working with schools. There seems little doubt that recognition of the importance of quality coaching running in parallel with an acknowledgement of the deficiencies of much PESS that would otherwise have been delivered by non specialist

teachers. The implications of this in terms of coach education and continuing professional development are obvious. However, we would also suggest that these findings highlight the absolute necessity of using programmes like this as vehicles for the professional up-skilling of non-specialist teachers, if they are to result in sustainable improvement and development.

The two themes offer an important insight, given the lack of information on the implementation of PESS for young people and the potential importance of PESS to the development of lifelong participation.

Partnerships, or more specifically effective partnerships, require quality coaches. But to extend this further, it was apparent that coaching practice and professional football clubs were unable to evidence impact and quality to inform head teacher decision-making. To evidence impact and/or quality could impact the development and sustainability of partnerships. Once consideration could be total quality management (TQM), which is an approach whereby all organizational members work towards achieving quality standards.⁴⁵ This involves a focus on customer satisfaction, continuous improvement and total involvement. Research and evaluation within TQM is key to continued improvement. It was apparent that there was a significant lack of monitoring and evaluation on the role of the coach and the outcomes of PESS delivery. This is a significant weakness, and threatens to undermine both ongoing improvement, and an honest appraisal that differentiates what works from what is perceived to work.⁴⁶ This may also hinder the development of more effective practice and in turn a drive towards continual improvement.⁴⁷

Within the current PESS landscape funding often can be short-term in nature, football clubs and schools must endeavour to develop their operations to include research and evaluation to satisfy funders and commissioners.⁴⁸ In this regard, it is important to adopt both process and impact evaluations that are planned from the outset.⁴⁹ This may involve partnering with an academic institute to provide this expertise.⁵⁰ This is also supported by NICE, who endorses the need to develop research and evaluation in understanding intervention for children and young people. ⁵¹

The coach was perceived positively by the schools, commenting on their quality, expertise and ability to support the objectives of PESS. The evidence of the importance of coaching quality is associated with continued professional development, which in past research into community coaches has been pinpointed as an area that requires more strategic and coordinated management.⁵² Interestingly, both the schools and football clubs found that their partnership involved professional development for and from both the teachers and community coaches. Despite this, some teachers highlighted that not all community coaches were fully prepared. In a study of a football-based school intervention, delivered by a professional football clubs across 4 schools and 57 primary school children, it was found that despite overwhelming support and approval for the community coaches (and the football club) there were elements of poor practice. Interestingly, this was unnoticed, unrecognized and unmonitored by either the football club or the schools involved. This research also highlighted a greater need for monitoring and evaluation.⁵³

This level of expertise of the coaches, identified by the head teachers links to NICE guidance for promoting PA in children and young people through relevant leadership and instruction.⁵⁴ NICE offers 15 recommendations all of which offer resonance for schools who play a major contributing role in children and young peoples' lives. Indeed, recommendations highlight the need to develop multi-component school and community programmes, as such the development of partnerships to deliver PESS with football clubs will play a key part in this. As such it appears that local partnerships between professional football clubs and schools can play a contributing role in the pursuit of supporting NICE,⁵⁵ especially in the absence of the SSP.⁵⁶ Indeed, professional football clubs

highlighted that they may have now indirectly picked up some of the roles of responsibilities within the new the PE and Sport Premium era. The coach was highlighted emphatically as a successful component of the partnership. Successful partnerships have been highlighted as efficient, predictable and dependable in a way that resources are shared, how the partnership is managed and how the goals are delivered.⁵⁷ This partnership was ultimately needs driven through the provision of coaching.⁵⁸

Conclusion

There is very little known about the implementation and partnerships involved in PESS, especially within the new PE and Sport Premium funding era. This research offers an insight into the delivery and partnerships involved. Amongst the growth in external providers of PESS for schools, it is clear that there are a number of partnerships developed between professional football clubs and schools. There appears to be an opportunity to develop the scope of these partnerships more formally to capitalize on the indirect outcomes, notably mutual continued professional development. Quality coaching is the key factor in the development and perceived effectiveness of the partnerships. As such, the development of continued professional development and quality assurance measures for community coaches would be critical to developing effective practice and partnerships. It was clear that the partnerships would also benefit from the monitoring and evaluation of coaching practice, which is currently absent. There is a need for process and impact evaluation on the PESS outcomes. The lack of monitoring and evaluation is something that must be remedied to enhance the understanding, the effectiveness and impact of the partnerships, in order to improve practice and the subsequent effectiveness of PESS. Given increased investment from strategic stakeholders such as The Premier League, it is vital that professional football clubs work towards enacting these positive changes. Without this, we can only speculate on how PESS can contribute lifelong participation in children and young people.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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